Wall Street Journal Jan 9, 1985

VOL. CCV NO. 6 ★★

The Desk Set

Well-Designed Offices Are Harder to Achieve In Age of Technology

The Physical Details Alone Present Tough Problems; Social Ones Are Tougher

Is Counting Pencils Enough?

By Stephen MacDonald
Staff Reporter of The Wall Street Journal

"Most people I know would rather work in a barn than in a modern office," says Bill Stumpf.

Mr. Stumpf ought to know. He works in a Minnesota barn himself—a handsomely renovated barn, to be sure—and he designs furniture for modern offices. A barn offers natural views, sunlight, irregular space and even a sense of playfulness—qualities that Mr. Stumpf says modern offices usually lack but that people badly need to be happy and productive.

"Technology is leading us around by the nose," he says, "and the office is becoming a high-tech ghetto. Working someplace that is like the inside of a DC-10 reinforces feelings of alienation and worthlessness."

Task Grows Tougher

Not every office designer would agree that the modern office is in such big trouble, but most are quick to say that the idea of the office is changing rapidly and that keeping the place human despite all the technology is a major challenge. Almost everyone in the field acknowledges that the task of designing an office has grown far more complex than it used to be, when all that was involved was finding everybody some kind of desk and chair.

Today, when a typical catalog of parts for office "work stations" can easily number 4,000 items, hardly anybody undertakes an office design without consultants to advise on interior design, lighting, communications, engineering systems and more—and sometimes the consultants go out and hire subconsultants of their own. Even then, the process drives many businessmen into a state of high anxiety.

Listen to David Schulte, the president of Chilmark Partners, a Chicago merchant-banking firm, who oversaw the design of new offices last year.

"It was terrifying," he says. "I was making important business decisions, and I was flying blind. There were all kinds of questions that nobody knows the answer to. You've got to be a genius to figure out what to do."

Pitfalls of Democracy

Or listen to Richard Spaulding, the executive vice president for administration at the publishing firm of Scholastic Inc., whose new spaces were intended to implement a kind of corporate democracy by substituting cubicles for private offices for all but the most senior executives.

"We wanted to bring our people closer together," he says. "We wanted more openness and more interaction. Unfortunately, we also got a loss of privacy and an annoying increase in the sound level."

Both of these companies were served by first-rate architectural firms—the Scholastic offices have even won prizes. So it isn't just the clients who are confused.

Why is it so much tougher to design an office today than it used to be?

The reason is that the office has become a lightning rod for many forces that are flashing through our culture. The most obvious force is technology. As anybody who works in an office knows, technology is changing the nature of work.

Spotlight on Subject

But there is more to it than that. More people work in offices than ever, both in numbers and in percentage of the work force, making the office environment the object of more attention than ever. From management's viewpoint, more workers using more-expensive office equipment in space that costs more every year add up to a major investment that must be productive.

At the same time, conventional wisdom seems to be tottering. About 10 years ago the open-office plan seemed a promising approach. Movable walls, or partitions, were in. Permanent interior walls were out. Heavily promoted by office-furniture makers eager to sell walls along with desks and chairs, the open-office "systems" offered management the economies of flexibility. But the open plan's popularity is faltering. Hardly anyone actually moves those flexible walls once they are in place, and middle-level employees have been scrambling back to the quiet status of closed doors and ceiling-high walls. Not coincidentally, all the major furniture vendors now have acquired the ability to produce full-height walls.

Some critics say the vendors are a big part of the problem. One of the most outspoken critics is Michael Brill, the president of the Buffalo Organization for Social and Technological Innovation, or Bosti. Mr. Brill advises companies and designers on such matters as productivity.

"Nobody designs an office today," he says. "They pick it from a vendor's catalog. And the vendor system tends to emphasize uniformity, ease of ordering, interchangeability—not necessarily an agenda that leads to worker satisfaction and productivity."

Flipping through these vendors' catalogs provides ample evidence of the current preoccupation with furniture for the high-tech office. Some of this is aimed at the worker who is tied to a computer all day: Highly adjustable chairs are finally commonplace, and "ergonomics," the

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study of the workplace, has become a buzzword. But there is still much struggling with nuts-and-bolts physical problems that have little to do with comfort.

For example, what to do about the wiring that links telephones or computer terminals? It can come through floor or ceiling channels and isn't difficult to install when a new space is being fitted out. But when needs change, running new wires turns into a costly headache as highly paid electricians work into the night.

All major office-equipment makers have addressed this problem. They have even given it a name, "wire management," and some, like Knoll International, have designed whole systems around it. Still, a solution for today's problems may be irrelevant tomorrow. "Wire problems," says Robert F. Beck, Knoll's vice president for product management, "are going away in five to 10 years" as such methods as fiberoptics rapidly advance.

The Intangibles

More vexatious than physical problems are the intangible complications wrought by technology, like learning to live with it.

"Consider a bank officer who is used to sitting at a big wooden desk on a platform and meeting with customers," says Richard A. Carlson, the interior-design principal at Swanke Hayden Cornell Architects in New York. "Now he's suddenly doing most of his job on the phone, and he's at a smaller desk where he shares a computer terminal with another officer. This is jarring to him. He feels like a clerk."

Not much is being done, it seems, to make such newly anxious people feel any better. And perhaps the answer is more a psychological one than one of design.

Meanwhile, companies keep spending heavily to effect the office transformation. No total figures are kept on office outlays, but the Business and Institutional Furniture Manufacturers Association estimates that sales by its members, which represent 90% of the contract-furniture business, climbed to $5.2 billion last year from $4.3 billion in 1983. And that is just for furniture.

"Now that the office has become the main place of doing business, managers are willing to put more capital investment into it," says Jeffrey Osborne, Knoll's vice president for design, "but they're also looking for a return in the form of increased productivity. Computers can measure that in lots of jobs."

Hallway Creativity

But productivity isn't so easily quantified in less-routine office work, and in those cases how can it be promoted? Says Ed Friedricks, the managing principal in the Los Angeles office-design firm of Gensler & Associates: "We're finding that many people do their most creative work outside the direct office environment—in the hallway, the dining room, wherever they can gather. So we have been paying more attention to nurturing those spaces and getting away from a total concentration on cosmetics and the work station itself."

Workers themselves are also taking a harder look at the office. A raft of social concerns is coming through the door. Unions have grown interested in such issues as safety and indoor pollution. Workers complain about cigarette smoke, windows that don't open and other quality-of-life issues—the ones that interest Bill Stumpf.

If architects and designers agree that the office presents a formidable design problem, most are satisfied that they have developed techniques to solve it.

One is beefed-up "programming," the research at the beginning of an office-design job. Says Tom Woodruff, the president of Intraspace Designers, a subsidiary of Reynolds, Smith & Hills, an architectural and design firm based in Jacksonville, Fla.: "We use interviews, questionnaires and observation to collect information about what they do in that office. We develop data on square footage, interrelationships, paper flow and communications, and we use a computer to sort it all out."

But some say much programming is still superficial. Bosti's Mr. Brill, who offers his own programming services, is downright scornful. "Most architects spend about a month programming a major job," he says. "This is what we call 'counting the pencils.' They want to know all the stuff you have and if it's enough. We spend more like three months, because we get into the psycho-social aspects—things like privacy, status, interaction, pathways. We study the whole organizational culture—what really goes on during the workday. Architects have grafted programming on because they perceive it's something the clients want, but what they really live for is designing."

Architects also emphasize the need for flexibility. "It's the key to it all," says Mel Hamilton, vice president of ISD Inc., a Chicago architecture firm. Swanke Hayden's Mr. Carlson agrees, "You just can't ever guess what's going to happen next. In smaller offices we can figure things will hold still for about five years, because the company isn't going to make a big investment in new technology any sooner. But with the bigger or more dynamic companies the changes seem to come almost daily. You have to make it look finished, but you have to keep it simple and flexible."

Again, though, Bosti's Mr. Brill demurs. "Some things need to be flexible, but others don't. If you provide too much flexibility, you don't support any activity well."

"And if you make it flexible, who's going to sort it out a year later?" he asks. "Unless you're in an organization that's large enough to have a really professional facilities manager to oversee the physical plant in terms of schedules, costs and people's needs—and it's such a new profession that not many do—there's no resident intelligence in the company that knows how to use the flexibility."

But the biggest problems seem to remain conceptual—just what should an office be? One man who has spent years thinking about the modern office is Niels Diffrient, an industrial designer whose recent emphasis has been on making chairs and other office equipment comfortable and easy to use. ("Why can't office furniture fit as well as clothing?" he asks.) His new Jefferson chair, designed for Sunar-Hauserman, resembles a luxurious padded lounge chair and ottoman. It is fitted with accessories on arms that swing into position as needed: a small light, a writing surface, a telephone and a computer keyboard.

How many executives will abandon their desks remains to be seen, but at least the Jefferson chair addresses the new nature of office work. Says Mr. Diffrient, "We've come a long way toward solving the physical problems of the workplace. The social and psychological problems are much tougher. I don't think we've even scratched the surface on those."